FOUR: WHAT SCHOOLS CAN LEARN FROM SPORTS

Over the past couple of years, I researched and wrote a book that explores the impact of participation in organized sports on children and adolescents.[1] For this extended period of time, I was immersed in the world, the culture, of sports—those beliefs, those values, those ways of doing things—at the same time I was involved with schooling through my work on a college of education faculty. Having this foot in two universes, as it were, I suppose it is natural that I found myself comparing the sports and school contexts. With my colleagues and students, I would frequently draw on what I was learning about sports to make sense of schools, shed light on some problem schools or teachers face, or to propose a solution to some educational issue. "You know, sports doesn't see it that way," I would announce. Or, "Coaches don't come at that as teachers do." Or, "Have you noticed that the same kid will approach things one way in the classroom and an altogether different, and better, way on the athletic field?" Although no one said anything, it crossed my mind that people might be starting to see me as the sports equivalent of the guy who wrote *Everything I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, or the central character, a gardener, in the Jerzy Kosinski book, *Being There*, who could only spout homilies drawn from his experience with plants.[2] It didn't go that far in my case (I hope), but I do believe my investigations into sports contributed to a clearer perception of what goes on in schools, as well as what could and should go on in them.

I'm sure that it wouldn't have had to be sports that provided this enhanced insight into schools, if that is what I have actually achieved. I probably would have gotten much the same result from a study of business or the military as I did studying sports. Because, really, a good way to make sense of anything is to contrast it with something else that takes on the same functions but does it in a different way. It just happened to be sports with me because of the book I was writing. The study of sports gave me an anthropological perspective of sorts—distance, objectivity, a sense of alternative possibilities—that I wouldn't have acquired focusing only on education. I believe the study of sports has enriched all of the essays in this collection, written during the same time period as the sports book.

It is particularly useful to get an anthropological perspective on education because the challenge in understanding this field is fundamentally different from most other fields. The difference is between making the strange familiar and making the familiar strange. With most other fields—let's say physics or ancient history—you aren't acquainted with them (they are "strange" to you),

and your job is to learn about them and get an angle on them (that is to say, make them "familiar"). With education, however, it is just the opposite. Here, you aren't coming at something cold, something you know nothing about. All of us are very familiar with schools. We have spent years and years in them. We know their ways exceedingly well. We have all been to the third grade and taken high school history and been part of the school culture. When you spend that much time anywhere, it is hard to get any perspective on it. There is the tendency to see those aims and modes of operation as a given, right, inherent in the nature of things, when in fact the way schools do business is but one alternative from several they could have chosen. But if those ways are all you have ever known, it is tough to see that.

An example of this phenomenon from the sports book: I hadn't known until I looked into it that in most countries around the world, schools don't sponsor sports teams. That kind of jolted me. All I had ever known is the big game between Washington and Jefferson high schools on Friday night, and without really thinking about it assumed that that's just the way things are. The realization that it isn't that way other places raised the question for me, "Well then, just why are American schools sponsoring teams and making such a big deal about sports?" That question lead to what I think was a productive analysis of schools' purposes that are served by interscholastic athletics.[3]

I know many say, "Look, you can't draw any parallels between sports and schools because they are totally different places. In sports, the kids choose to be there and they are interested and motivated, and that's not the case in schools." It is true that the sports and school situations can't be equated; there are differences between them. But nevertheless we can still learn things from the way others think and do things even if they aren't in exactly the same circumstance we are. We can come to see, in this case, schools with new eyes in the way I've been describing and, perhaps with some adaptations, use aspects of their approach in the school setting. And anyway, people overstate the differences between the sports and classroom situations. Coaches face the same challenges as teachers do; or if they face different challenges, they are different more in degree than in kind. Talk to coaches and they will tell you that just because youngsters are interested in a sport and want to be good at it and join a team doesn't automatically mean smooth sailing for the coach. An athlete can be all fired up about the idea of playing the sport and still not be motivated and disciplined once they actually get on the field. Plus, many athletes who get on the teams are not really fired up at all. Some have a lukewarm interest, or they simply see it as the thing to do since it is hyped so much in school and on the media; more or less, they just

show up. The fact of the matter is that coaches have to motivate and discipline their athletes. Coaches, like teachers, have to get those in their charge to take instruction. Coaches too have to get people to work together and support one another. They also have to encourage responsibility and hard work and persistence. Don't make too much of the sports-and-school differences.

Below, I will list a number of contrasts between sports and schools and what I make of them. When I say that sports are this way and schools are that way, I know that there are many exceptions to this generalization. I also realize that often I am making the distinctions between the two worlds starker, more clear-cut, than they actually are. With those disclaimers on the table, however, I do believe that the following discussions get at some basic, and significant, distinctions between the sports and school cultures. And most important in this context, I think the way I draw these distinctions sheds light on what goes on in schools and points the way to improving them.

DIVERSITY VERSUS INDIVIDUAL MERIT

Increasingly over the past several decades, schools have taken on the cause of racial justice. In a major way, they have been guided in this undertaking by the concept of *diversity*, and in particular *racial* diversity. The ideal of diversity has been strongly represented in the school curriculum. Schools have promoted diversity to students as a value they should affirm and incorporate into their own lives. Diversity has also been the rationale for affirmative action school hiring and student admissions practices.

As have schools, sports has reflected the racial tensions and hopes of America. Sports, too, has joined the quest for racial harmony and racial justice, and at least on the field of competition—it has a longer way to go at the management and ownership levels—it has been remarkably successful. Before Jackie Robinson's entry into major league baseball in 1947, black players were barred from white professional sports by informal agreements among the team owners. When the word got out that Robinson was going to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers, some white players on the team threatened to quit in protest. Players from other teams in the league threatened to boycott the games against the Dodgers. Once Robinson began playing, the name-calling and taunting directed his way were vicious. Pitchers fired at his head and runners tried to spike him as they came into first and second bases, Robinson's positions in the field. However, within a decade of Robinson's breaking the color line, as it was called, by all accounts animosity and friction in professional sports was limited, and it has continued to improve to this day.

After Robinson, there was a time when black players were only allowed to play if they were stars—whites-only among the benchwarmers. Now the twelfth (lowest) man who sits on the end of the bench of an NBA team is often an African American. There was also a time of racial quotas—only so many minorities on a team. Now minorities comprise around 70% of the NFL and 80% of the NBA players. There was a time of "position-stacking," where African Americans were only allowed to play certain positions, competing against each other for those slots on the team. Now in football, for example, you'll see African American centers, middle and interior linebackers, and quarterbacks—positions from which they were formerly discouraged or excluded.

So how did sports achieve this racial progress? First, how sports *didn't* do it. Sports didn't ground its efforts in the principle of diversity. Rather, sports was guided by three other principles: *racial integration*, *equal opportunity*, and *individual merit*. I'll illustrate how this has worked in sports by way of a hypothetical situation. Let's say the New York Yankees have to find a new second baseman upon the retirement of the incumbent. How would they go about doing that?

If the Yankees were guided by the concept of diversity, here's what they would probably do. They would survey the racial backgrounds of the players on the Yankee team to see which race the second baseman needs to be in order to best complement the racial composition of the current roster. Assume that they conclude that a minority player would best diversify the team. It could be an African American, Asian, Latino, or Native American, and if they took gender into account, a woman. But let's assume that an African American is chosen as the favored minority representative to play second base because of what the Yankees perceive to have been the especially unfair treatment of African American baseball players, or African Americans generally, in the past, and the current handicaps African American players, or African Americans overall, have as a result of the legacy of that mistreatment. The Yankees would then give preference to an African American from among a pool of qualified candidates, i.e., those players who can play second base at the major league level. Another possibility, the Yankees could give preference to African Americans from a pool of *qualifiable* candidates—those considered likely to develop the capability of playing second base at a competent major league level at some point in the future even though they don't possess it at this time. The Yankees could justify any of these practices—they might employ the positive-sounding term *affirmative action* to refer to them—to the other Yankee players by telling them that they would profit from playing with players of other cultural backgrounds. In similar fashion, they

could try to convince Yankee fans that they would benefit ftom watching players who reflect, in this case, an African American style of play.

The Yankees could take that route in finding a second-baseman, but they don't. The biggest reason the Yankees don't do it that way is that while it would get them a more diverse team and a decent second-baseman either now or up the line, it wouldn't get them what they most want, and that is the best possible team. What if it turned out that a white man is the best second-baseman available? If the Yankees discriminate against him and don't get the benefit of his services, they lower their chances of besting their competitors in the American League. Plus, they run the chance of having the Yankee players chastise them privately and in the press for not doing all they can to put the best team on the field. More, white players on the team could get resentful against the ownership and management of the team for what they see as a breech of fundamental fairness and blatant racial bias against those of their race. And even though the Yankees could try to keep him from learning about it, the white second baseman that is actually the best player might find out what went on and raise hell about it. The Yankee ownership and management could counter those contingencies by calling the white players "racists" and "angry white males" and reminding them of the benefits of diversity, and that may put a lid on things for a while. But the resentment among whites, the race-consciousness of both whites and minorities that grows out of the categorization of players by race, and the climate created by a focus on past and present race-based injustices and grievances and the claims and counterclaims that inevitably go along with that, could well result in racial friction and divisiveness on the team. And that's the last thing the Yankees want or need.

So what do the Yankees do instead? They do everything they can to ensure that every potential player has an equal chance to get the second base job. In the jargon, they widen the applicant pool. They make it known that no race or ethnic group will be excluded from consideration. They look far and wide for candidates. Now there are Yankees scouts looking for players in Latin America and Asia. They give the candidates with promise encouragement and training in the minor leagues as long as they work hard and improve. And then the second base job goes to the very best player. Individual merit and not group membership determines who plays second base. A qualification on that is that salary considerations might play a role—if one player comes much cheaper than another, that might carry some weight in the decision. And it is true that New York is always on the lookout for Hispanic players because of the composition of their fan base. But with that said, by far the number one requisite for getting to play second base for the Yankees is a player's performance.

Sports contends this system works best for everybody concerned. The owners aren't forced to hire inferior players. They can put together the best possible team and thereby increase their chances of good attendance at the games, a good "buzz" about the team which can be useful when they are looking for public support in building a new stadium and obtaining tax breaks, and negotiating favorable television contracts. Fans get to see the very best players. And most important, minority players have flourished under this arrangement. (At this writing, seven of the eight position players on the Yankees are minorities.) Minorities have more than simply gotten a chance to play; they have excelled. To use a sports metaphor, people learn to play the game that is on the table. Minority athletes have played the game that is on the sports table very well indeed. This has increased the respect others, including whites, have for them, and their pride and confidence in themselves. Plus they have fattened their bank accounts this way—true excellence is the ticket to big money in any endeavor. Minority athletes have been encouraged by the system to develop their skills to the utmost because they know they will not get spots on the team unless they earn them by being the very best at their position. They can't count on double standards to carry them along. If minorities knew that they would get racial preferences under a concept of diversity, undoubtedly they would not be as motivated or productive. And last, the system sports uses has resulted in improved relationships among the races, because judging people by their individual merit is consistent with a concept of fair play that down deep all Americans share.

I find myself thinking and saying, and now writing, that schools and the rest of sociery ought to do it the way sports does it. Give the job or slot in a school or program, whatever it is, to the person who is most qualified on his or her individual merits. Don't try to undo or compensate for past injustices—you only compound the problem. Just start from here with a process that is at the core of the American value system: giving everybody a fair shot. Provide a level playing field (I'm full of sports metaphors these days), i.e., the same chance and encouragement for everyone. Don't treat people as racial categories. And don't lower standards. Lower standards for somebody or some group and sure as anything their performance will sooner or later—probably sooner—match that standard. They will become self-doubting about their capability and worth, and dependent on the standard being low. If the standard for some reason goes up, they will be in trouble because they won't be able to meet it. And in the name of diversity don't put down the dominant culture. Sports has a dominant culture that it upholds and invites athletes to enter, bringing with them their own uniqueness to enrich that culture. Athletes know that the dominant culture is

where the game is played. That is where the gratification and respect and rewards, including financial, are. Sports understands that the payoffs are in the core of American life, not around the edges. Sports gets that reality, while other places, including schools, seem not to.[4]

"WE'LL COME TO YOU" VERSUS "YOU COME TO THE SPORT"

A central value in the education culture is being flexible and accommodative with students. From every direction—from the literature in the field, from those who train teachers, from other educators, from the historical record of the profession—schools and teachers are encouraged to adjust what they do in light of students' personal histories, social and family circumstances, needs, interests, personal preferences, developmental stages, and learning styles and deficits. The message that comes through to educators from their world is to fit the schooling to the students and not the other way around. Teach kids not subjects. Don't be locked in to a set curriculum or instructional approach. Connect to where the students are. Do what is relevant to students. Don't be out of touch with those you teach. This is the language of the field. The message that comes through to students from teachers (again, I am generalizing) is "We are prepared to come to you" or "We'll meet you more than half way."

It is not that coaches are totally unresponsive to their athletes; a contrast doesn't have to involve complete opposites. Good coaches fit their system to the particular athletes they are dealing with, and at times adopt an entirely new system in order to best suit the talents of the athletes they are working with. This sounds like the sort of thing teachers do, and it is, but those things go on in a sports context that is fundamentally different from that of the schools'. Because the sports setting really isn't saying "We'll come to you" to participants. Nor, for that matter, is it saying the opposite of that—"You are coming to us" (to me, the coach). Sports doesn't personalize things in that way. The basic message to athletes in sports is "You are coming to this sport!" In their own ways, coaches hold up the ideal of the finest approximation of the particular sport—basketball, football, volleyball, whatever it is—and challenge participants to match up to the way the game is played when it is played right. The coach aligns himself with the sport, represents it, is a conduit for students as they move toward it.

Coaches stand their ground. They communicate, more in bearing and action than in words, "We [this sport and I] are not going wherever you want to go. We are staying right here." Coaches get it across that there is a way that good athletes

in this sport go at it, and that that is what is expected of every person here. They let their athletes know that the sport stays as it is regardless of how these particular individuals feel about it and regardless of where they are in their lives. There is a job to be done, and they have to do it with the coach's and each others' help.

Coaches emanate a forcefulness when they impart this message which comes from the fact that the coaches are not alone in front of these people. In a very real way, the sport is up there with them, alongside of them; what it is and what it has been, its finest players and coaches, what it represents. Coaches are not simply "kid people" or "athlete people." (The only connection many teachers feel is with their students.) Most serious coaches are "sport people," connected to something beyond themselves and their relationship to those they are working with, and this gives them a firmer grounding, a more commanding presence, power, than they would otherwise have. Coaches *really* believe in the message they are sending. They *intend* (more than hope) to live it out, make it a reality. And they will *resist*, not cave in to, attempts to undermined it by athletes. All of this contributes to the credibility and impact of what they are getting across to sports participants.

The issue this discussion surfaces for me is whether educators are going to students, as it were, too much. Have teachers played down the importance of subject matter content to the point that they aren't rooted as much as they could be and need to be to be efficacious? Do teachers need to be planted more firmly in what is best and most valuable in their fields, and then bring their students to that? As you can tell, I'm answering yes to these questions. I think students would profit from going to the academic disciplines, so to speak, and learning their concepts and methodologies. Also, by going to students, teachers are implicitly teaching them that the adult world they will enter later on will accommodate them in the same way. There are places for people who haven't grown out of having to have things fit to them and be interesting and relevant and a good time right now, and it isn't in the major leagues of life. Educators need to think more about the extent to which their good faith attempts to modify things and make school interesting and relevant are keeping their students from someday hitting .300 in the game of life.

WHO IS THE FOCAL ACTOR?

Assume you are going to watch two videotapes. One of them will be of a classroom, a high school history class, say. The other is of a sporting event, a high school football game. Take a few seconds and picture in your mind's eye what you think you would be likely to see on the tapes.

Here is my guess about what you pictured: For the classroom tape, it was one of a several things. A teacher, man or woman, up in front of a group of students standing by a chalkboard telling them something, say about the Great Depression. Or, another possibility, it was a teacher leading a discussion—posing questions and fielding student responses. A third possibility, the camera follows a teacher as he or she goes from group to group as students work on projects. A fourth possibility, the teacher looks over the shoulders and speaks to individual students or pairs sitting in front of computer screens. Was I accurate? Was it one of those images that came into your mind?

Now for the football game. Here is my guess of what you imagined: The camera seems to be shooting from high up along the sidelines. One team is running plays against the other team's defense, runs and passes. Occasionally the camera takes in the coach as he paces the sideline animatedly, shouts out encouragement and instructions to the players on the field, and talks to players as they come off the field and just before they go into the game. Was that what you pictured?

Here's my point with all this, and it has to do with who received the major share of camera time in these videotapes. In the classroom, the camera followed the teacher around, and on the field primarily it fixed in on the players. You have seen coverage of football games, and you may well have seen tapes of classrooms, and this is how it goes, right? That it happens this way gets at a fundamental difference between the classroom and sports contexts. In a classroom, the focal actor—the person the situation is most about, the one a camera will naturally keep in its frame most of the time—tends to be the teacher. Classrooms are essentially about what teachers do, and that is the case even in what are labeled student-centered classrooms, those emphasizing student projects, presentations, and independent work. Even in those situations, it is still Mr. Smith's or Ms. Jones' class, still, at its heart, about what this teacher does, what this teacher says and assigns, and students' response to that. Even when students are giving a report or serving on a panel, there is the sense that they are playing the teacher's game, as it were. By and large, no matter what is going on in the class, students perceive themselves as going to Johnson's English class. As good as the class may be, it's still her show, it's about her.

In sports, it isn't that way. We wouldn't expect a video of a football game to be two-and-a-half or three hours of a coach pacing the sidelines, because at its essence the football game isn't about him coaching. Rather, it is about the players playing. Sports is about what the athletes do. This holds true in practice as well as the games. While the athletes know that the coach has things planned and that he will run them through drills and such, nevertheless they view practice as

an occasion for them to play ball. They don't go to watch somebody coach. They go to perform.

And notice that the featured athletes—the salient ones, the ones who are the most central—in the sports situation are the ones who are closest to giving it their all and getting positive things done. Sports tends to be about the people doing it right. In contrast, often in classrooms the students the class is most about, the ones setting the tone and getting the teacher's and other students' attention, are the mess-ups and the ones trying to bring the enterprise down. So often, schools are about the people doing it wrong. Football practice, on the other hand, is not going to be about the players who don't like the game and are trying to screw it up for everybody. In the sports culture, these kinds of people are marginalized, ignored, or treated with disdain. You get to the inside of a sports situation by doing things right, not wrong.

In school, the good students frequently sit there all but ignored while the teacher attends to and tries to win over the discipline problems, as they are called. (Sports doesn't have anything as benign as "discipline problem" to call people who foul things up for themselves and others.) In the classroom, the smart-asses and cynics are likely to set the tone. If they tried this same act at four o'clock at sports practice, they would be on the outside looking in. And that's not to say they would be kicked off the team, although screw-off athletes are sometimes told to play that attitude and conduct somewhere else. More likely, they would be put on the sidelines and treated with a quiet contempt. That is a powerful method of discipline, if you want to call it that. Schools have never learned to do it well and it has cost them.

It should be noted that because the athlete tends to be the focal element, that doesn't mean the coach is uninvolved, passive, or a deferring facilitator. In sports, it is not viewed as an either-or matter, where if one person is central the other must necessarily be peripheral or subordinate. While the camera figuratively or literally focuses on the athletes playing as hard as they can, at the very same time the coach is coaching with all he's got. He doesn't assume that he has to assume a low profile for the light to shine on the athletes. In sports, there is the expectation that if things are going to work, everybody has to do his job all out, and that includes the coach.

Given this difference in who is most focal in the sports and school settings, what follows from that?

First, we can expect athletes to be more engaged and motivated than students. And it isn't just because athletes want to be there and are truly

interested in the activity. There is that, and it is a fact of life that teachers have to live with. (Back to the libertarians, one wonders what would happen if we quit forcing youngsters to be in places where they don't want to be, and forcing teachers to teach people who don't want to be in their classrooms.) But there is more to it that. Simply, people are going to more invested if they think that it is something *they* are doing. It is the difference between going to a workshop and giving one. You are going to have your head in it, as they say in sports, much more if the workshop is something you do rather than something you respond to. In sports, pitchers go over tapes of their pitching turns and quarterbacks analyze the way they drop back to pass. It would be virtually ludicrous to even think about students doing the same kind of thing with their performance in class. If there is any of that at all, it is something the teacher does, not the students. Students aren't engaged that way in the school culture; that is not how they are defined there.

It would seem that one way to get students more connected, self-directed, self-analytical, and self-corrective, is to move in the direction of making them and not the teacher the central actors in the classroom. One way to get at that would be for teachers to make a paradigm shift in their own minds, to a picture of the classroom as a place that is about the work of students rather than themselves. If teachers did that, they would approach things differently. The class would be about students "studenting" and not about them teaching. It would be about students studying biology and not about the teacher teaching biology or simply about biology. It would be about the students doing something rather than the relationship between the students and the teacher. When teachers planned classes, they would ask themselves, What do students need to do to learn? and, What can I do to help students do that? Which is different from asking, What do I have to do to teach? Asking the What do the students have to do? question makes the nature of students' work, as they perceive it, clearer—its purpose and meaning from their side, its continuity for them, what they have to put into it to achieve. It is likely to contribute to a stance, a bearing, a posture, in the teacher that gets across to students, "This is a place that is about *your* work."

Under this "student work as focal" arrangement, the teacher may do many of the same things as before, let's say give a lecture. But, one hopes, the meaning of that lecture will be different for both the teacher and the students. The occasion will be about the students listening to a lecture as an aspect of their work instead of it being about the teacher giving the lecture as an aspect of his work. That distinction is subtle and subjective, but nevertheless crucially important.

A second thing that follows from this difference in who is most focal is that whoever's job is the most central is going to get the most attention. In the field of education, there are endless books and articles about every facet of teaching—what teachers do. The act of teaching has been broken down and analyzed and debated up, down, and sideways. But the same cannot be said for studenting—a funny-sounding word to be sure, but we really don't have a term for what students do that parallels teaching, which alone tells you something about the school culture. Where is the literature on exactly what a good student does? Where are the in-depth analyses and theories about how someone becomes a better student than before, or becomes a good student in spite of things being stacked against him? In sports, the golf swing has been broken down and inspected in minute detail. We know much more about the game of golf than we do about the game of going to school, and the latter is at least as important. Pretty much, students who want to turn it around in their studies aren't going to get much more than admonitions to "work harder" or "study more" to guide them. Sports does much better than that. It doesn't tell golfers to simply take the game more seriously and to practice more. It tells them exactly what to do to hit the ball straighter and farther off the tee.

The fact of the matter is that many students, more than many suppose, want to do better in school and would be willing to put energy into it. But they tried before and nothing happened, and right now they find their classes boring or beside the point, or they just can't figure out what the teacher wants, and they are stuck, not really knowing what to do. They end up waiting around for the teacher to make the class more accessible and manageable. The worry in all of this is that what students learn in schools is to depend on someone or something to make things better for them because they really can't do it for themselves. Not a good posture for young people to take into adult life, particularly in light of educators' often-expressed desire to produce people who can rise above the limits in their worlds.

Despite its rhetoric, teaching is a very self-referenced profession. It would seem time to at least balance the scrutiny we give to what teachers do with a more detailed investigation of what students do when they are effective. We have a lot of research and literature about bad students. Imagine if most of the books on golf were about bad golfers. Just as sports does, education has to spend more time with "success cases"—students doing it right. Exactly how do they get it done? How do they think, how do they act, how do they approach their work as students? Sports can tell you about all of that in great detail with reference to athletes. Educators need to be able to do the same about students.

PRO AND CON ABOUT NATURALISM

For decades, it has been a widely held belief among educators that if things are arranged right, students can learn virtually effortlessly—or at least learning doesn't have to be an arduous process. Learning, so it is thought, is a natural process. Human beings are disposed to learn, and do so as a matter of course if they are in the right circumstances. Educators point to language acquisition as a prime example of how this can work. Learning to speak is a remarkable achievement when you think about it, and children do it without a ton of efforting, without plowing through textbooks or enduring tedious, joyless assignments. Learning to use language is an aspect of children's overall development as human beings. It comes about as a byproduct of their activities and exchanges with other people. Children are in tune with their natural rhythm or pace throughout the process—they aren't rushed along.

Educators think that if they can replicate these conditions in school, other things—math, science—can be learned in a similar, natural, manner to the way children learn language. And students will learn effectively this way: this view holds that the reason students don't learn well in school is because schools put them in situations that are abstract, artificial, and pressured. Learning doesn't have to be boring and hard work and repetitious and stressful. Learning can be interesting and enjoyable, and it is the teacher's responsibility to make it so for students. In fact, the ability to do that is the measure of a good teacher.

There is a word for this way of looking at things: *naturalism*.[5] For a good part of this century, naturalism has been central in the school culture, particularly in public schools. That is not to say that all professional educators subscribe to this view, just as not everyone accepts any assumption or value in a culture. But naturalism is part of the conventional wisdom in the education profession. Few educators would use the word naturalism to refer to this theory, but nevertheless it has a strong influence on their practice.

Naturalism isn't big in the sport culture. Sports holds that most important sports learnings do not emerge out of the natural flow of life. The typical coach lets his athletes know up front that what they have to do won't be easy. It's going to take dedicated, focused, and persistent hard work. At times things are going to be repetitive, so get ready for that. And it is not always going to be fun. Sport is not afraid of drill and practice; sports people see those things as necessary for getting important things done. If a player can't do these kinds of things when they are called for, they are going to hold themselves back. Schools tend to put these processes down as low-level activities, and instead stress processes such

critical thinking, problem solving, and discovery learning, where students operate at a higher level and acquire insight and meaning. Sports says there is a place for those kinds of things, but there is also a place for gut work.

Coaches realize that their athletes are conditioned by the popular media—and, not infrequently, by the schools they attend—ro assess and engage things on the basis of how immediately interesting, exciting, or fun they are. For their part, schools often hold out the promise that what they have in store for students will be interesting and fun—even exciting—and try hard to deliver on that promise. In fact, a virtually sure way for a student to bring a school to its knees is to declare that he finds what is going on to be boring. The sports world doesn't buy into that. The sport culture fights back against that posture. It is not that sports is against things being interesting and fun; sports hopes that they are. It is just that that isn't the criterion for whether something is done or not. The sports culture represents another standard: doing something because it is *useful, necessary* to becoming the best possible athlete, the best possible team.

Sports asserts that approaching things from that frame of reference will bring the athlete personal satisfaction and self-respect, a much richer experience that an immediate good time. Sports holds the line when athletes try to downplay or circumvent this perspective, and actively resocialize participants into it. As one major league manager put it in reference to players in his team's minor league system in one of the interviews a colleague and I conducted, "We teach our players to do things that aren't a whole lot of fun."

Sports stresses that what athletes are going to do will be *mature* work, the same kind of things that the big leaguers do. Sports assumes that youngsters deep down want to do adult-like things, things that are valued and respected in the adult world. Naturalism, on the other hand, encourages educators to involve students in what are considered to be age-appropriate or developmentally responsive activities. Personally, I think sports is closer to having it right, and that educators underestimate how much young people want to be treated more adult-like than kid-like in school.

Part of the theory of naturalism is the idea that each child learns in his own fashion. There are many ways of achieving a particular learning objective, so it is thought. "Everybody doesn't learn in the same way," you hear often among educators. There is much talk about learning styles, cognitive differences, and multiple intelligences.[6] What it all comes down to is an emphasis on individual differences and the idea that there is more than one way to skin a cat.

Sports doesn't reject the idea of individual differences, but at the same time there is less reliance on a "one way for him and another way for this other person" mentality in sports. There are times when it is advantageous to take advantage of players' individual styles and strengths, say when one basketball player specializes in rebounding and playing defense because that is where he can be most successful and helpful to the team. But there are other times—and this is most of the time—when the job at hand has to be done in a certain way, and players have to be helped to acquire or utilize the capability to do it that way. In these cases, it is the requirements of the task and not the predilections of the athlete that determine how things will be done. A jump shot requires a certain technique; that isn't up for grabs. A player has to be able to do what it takes to get something done correctly.

In sports, there is much more of: "There is a right way to get this done. Now, you may have a style that is over here and strengths that are over there, and that's fine. But to get this particular thing accomplished, this is how you are going to have to think and this is how you are going to have to act. You are going to have to do it this way because that is what this job requires. You play to your style and strengths and you are going to get a lot of things done—but not this thing. You can't just hang out with how you tend to do things. Do that and you stay limited as to what you can get done." Educators might think more about the validity of this approach. Maybe there is actually a best way to skin a cat, and if you are going to skin one you need to learn it.

Part of naturalism is the idea that every child learns at his own pace. So put the child in charge of the pace, and if not that, at least don't be rushing things along as a teacher. Here again, the sports world begs to differ. Coaches push the pace. There is a sense of urgency. Time is precious. The big game is coming up and we have to get to things done right now. So move it! More than one observer has noted the drifty, slow pace in many classrooms. The project takes weeks. The report got postponed from last week to this week . . . and now it's been put it off again until next Tuesday. Again I have a worry about what schools are teaching people: in this case, the attitude that things get done when they do, so what's the hurry. I'm afraid that posture isn't going to play too well in key parts of adult life.

It looks to me as if the sports culture may be on to something here. I think about what the novelist Ian McEwan has one of the characters say in his book, *The Child in Time*: "If learning could be fun, that was all very well. But fun was

peripheral . . . . Triumph over difficulty was what gave children their dignity and sense of mental discipline . . . . Teachers should accept difficulty, celebrate it, and make pupils do likewise." I think there is truth in that.

THE TENDENCY TO DICHOTOMIZE

The sports world has the reputation for being a rigid place, where things are simplistically viewed as being either this way or that way and where there isn't much complexity and flexibility. Given that image, it will probably be considered ironic that I believe schools can learn from sports' sophistication and adaptability in a number of areas. The one I will discuss in this section is the way sports deals with opposite—or at least apparently opposite—ideas, values, and processes. I have found that sports is less locked in than schools are to viewing matters dichotomously—that is to say, in either-or terms.

As an example, let's consider the processes of cooperation and competition. For many years, schools have been forthrightly in favor of cooperation and very much against competition. They believe in students working together, collaborating on group projects, and formally and informally tutoring one another. The more cooperation the better is how educators look at it. On the other hand, school people think competition is to be avoided wherever possible. Competition pits people against each other, works against group cohesion and the inclusion of everyone in the classroom community, escalates stress and lowers self-esteem, and it is antithetical to democratic living. Get competition out of the classroom.

Of course, sports is big on competition—but not *all* competition. Schools talk about competition as if it were a unitaty phenomenon, a single thing, and that single thing is bad, cutthroat, dehumanizing competition. Sports, however, recognizes that competition doesn't come in just one form. Indeed, there is the kind of winning-is-everything, come-out-on-top-at-any-cost brand of competition that can lead to abusing one's body, hostility toward one's opponents, cheating, and more.

While that kind of competition exists in sports, it is not at the core of the sports culture. There is another form of competition that is the most valued in sports. That is the competition characterized by intensity and all-out effort but kept within the limits of a concept of fair play. In this concept of competition, one's fellow competitors are not enemies to vanquish but rather partners in an experience that brings out the best in everyone. It is a form of competition that sees honor in losing the contest if one gives it his all and participates fairly. This is the kind of competition sports people espouse. Hatchetmen—athletes who

use thuggery to get ahead—and steroid users and other cheaters are criticized by the sports community, and the most revered athletes are those who play by the rules. Anybody who equates sports with the worst form of competition is setting up a straw man to knock over.

Not only does sports promote good, clean competition, it doesn't set it off against cooperation. Schools talk about cooperation—or the term they are using with increasing frequency, collaboration—as if it has to be one or the other, competition or collaboration. It is either collaboration or competition, choose a side, and they are for collaboration. In other words, they dichotomize the two processes, deal with them as if they were contradictory and mutually exclusive opposites. Sports doesn't look it that way. Sports is for competition *and* collaboration. It thinks both processes are valuable. On the best of sports teams, players compete vigorously with one another for starting positions and as a team against opponents. But athletes also collaborate with the coach and one another just as hard; sports pushes the concept of teamwork. In sports, competition and collaboration are viewed as potentially complementary, mutually enhancing polarities. In sports, it isn't a question of which one to favor; rather, it is how can both be integrated effectively into the sports experience.

Sports doesn't think you have to play up one process at the expense of the other. So it isn't a matter of arriving at a compromise position where it is 60% competition and 40% teamwork, or a diminished version of both to accommodate the presence of the other. It is all-out 100% competition *and* all-out 100% collaboration. Compete with all you've got and be a good teammate with all you've got, that is what the sports culture is about. Schools are much more about backing off here so you can emphasize there. An example related to sports, schools often tell athletes that their schoolwork comes first over their involvement in athletics. The idea is that the young athlete should ease off on sports to make room for improved school performance. In contrast to that is the PASS program operated by the American Sports Institute, an organization reflective of the sports rather than school culture. PASS has been successful in helping high school student-athletes do better academically. PASS doesn't tell young athletes school comes first over sports. Rather, it says they *both* come first. PASS's message is, "Give both school and sports 100%. Don't play off one activity against the other. Let them support one another. Use your commitment and achievements in one to set the standard for and guide your involvement in the other."[8]

In the same way, sports doesn't treat individuality, self-concern, and individual initiative as if they were antithetical to collaboration and community.

School people talk a great deal about the evils of individualism: "Schools have been highly individualistic places and we are getting beyond that," is how it often goes. "Now we are stressing community, shared decision-making, and the group instead." This one is complicated because there are more than a few sports situations that subordinate the individual to the collective ("There is no 'I' in team," etc.). But more frequently, sports contexts allow for individuals to be concurrently invested in both their own unique destiny and the good of the team. Sports is about both stars and teams. Again, it isn't either-or; you don't have to decry individuality to promote the good of the whole. Players—and students—can be highly self-interested and highly

other-interested. In the best of sports situations, the more someone is one quality the more it contributes to the other quality. In sports, the most admired athletes are those who stand out from the others as one-of-a-kind players *and* make the other players around them better and contribute to their teams winning championships.

Schools could learn from this perspective. There is a rather persistent tendency to dichotomize in education. Not sometimes this and sometimes that. Not a harmonious integration of this and that. It is this *or* that. It is discovery learning *or* expository teaching—so don't ever lecture. Textbooks are *always* bad. It is theme-based, or integrated, curriculum *or* single subjects. It is mixed (heterogeneous) classes *or* grouping—which side are you on? Depth ("less is more") is better than breadth (coverage), *period.* It is authentic evaluation *or* standardized tests. It is skills (learning how to learn, critical thinking, etc.) *or* subject matter content. And on and on and on.

MOTIVATION

Basically, schools see motivation as the teacher's job. If the students are turned off or disengaged, it is the teachers' fault. In fact, one of the primary measures of good teaching in the profession is how well the teacher can motivate students. Teachers spend inordinate amounts of time attending to the issue, stewing over it, efforting around it. In order to stir their students up, they focus on this topic of study rather than that one. They investigate students' developmental stages, interests, and personal styles to better understand what will engage them more with the work of the class. They devise more enticing assignments and class activities. They spice up their deliveries. They work on relating to students better and being personally likable under the assumption that students' good feelings about the teacher and connection with them will transfer to the material.

Sports is more successful at turning that situation around 180 degrees. Instead of it being the coach's job to motivate the athlete, in the sports culture it is the *athletes'* job to demonstrate that they have what it takes to be motivated. In the athletes' eyes, it isn't so much whether the coach is up to it but rather whethet they, the *athletes,* are up to it. Can they show this coach and their fellow athletes that they have the requisite drive and determination? It doesn't play nearly as well in the sport culture as it does in the school culture for participants to come on passive or to announce for all to hear that they aren't turned on by the enterprise. Pinning responsibility for their lack of motivation on the coach and sitting back and watching to see whether he can catch their attention doesn't go over nearly as big in sports as it does in the classroom. In fact, a good way for students to get a teacher to do a tap dance (go on about why the class is important, how terrific it is going to be, try to be especially entertaining or ingratiating, let students know how much he cares about them, etc.) is to assume a ho-hum/ show-me posture. Most coaches simply won't dance to that tune, and it takes two to tango, as they say.

Schools and sports have differing assumptions about what accounts for what people do. Schools see motivarion primarily as a function of the interplay of what the situation is like and what the person in that situation is like. Given where students are in their lives—their developmental status, personality, the influences of their family, race, social class, the peer culture, the media, and so on—some things are going to be interesting and relevant and motivating and some things are going to be boring and removed and a turn-off. This being the case, teachers have to alter that circumstance, either by changing what the student is like or changing what the environment is like. And since it is easier—or deemed easier, anyway—to change the environment than to change students, that is what teachers attempt to do. But they have to study students—what they are like and their situations in the other parts of their lives—in order to know how to modify the class to make it more motivating for them. Informed by this insight into students, teachers embark on altering the content of study, changing their instructional style, and so on.

In contrast, sports sees motivation more as a *quality* or *trait* a person possesses. It is somewhat like grace: either a person has been blessed with motivation or he hasn't. Given this outlook, it becomes a matter of coaches watching athletes to see whether they possess this grace. From the students' side, they feel challenged to reveal to the coach, other athletes, and spectators that they indeed have been graced.

Along with that—and I know this is contradictory, but the sports culture is able to integrate these conflicting approaches—sports deals with motivation as

if it were a matter of an athlete's *choice*. Sports says to athletes, "The hell with what you are like and what the rest of your life is like or was like. There is a job to be done, now *do it* ! You have it in you to get beyond what your environment is or has been like, and the pulls and tugs inside you and your limitations and ways of doing things. They don't have to control you! You have the power to get beyond all that and do what needs to be done. That power is called *will*. It is called *choice*. It is called *determination*. It is called *persistence*. It is called *character*." Schools also urge students to choose to turn things around in their schoolwork, but they don't transmit that message with much force and assurance, because they proceed from the premise that by and large students are products of their circumstance.

Grounded in its perspective on motivation, sports doesn't give over so much energy to investigating the athlete and his circumstance in life. And it doesn't change the sport—"We are playing the same game the Indiana Pacers and Los Angeles Lakers play." Instead, it evokes the power of the athletes to choose their way of being in spite of the influences and limitations in their life. Sports is about rising above situations not resonating with them. Sports challenges athletes to fly in the face of everything that has tried to clip their wings. Sports helps athletes experience how good it feels to accept that responsibility. Sports provides the opportunity to learn that while it is often tough and no fun at all, live from that posture, that stance, and at the end of the day you feel good about yourself. You have a sense of satisfaction and pride in yourself that is rich and rewarding. It seems to me that the sports world gets more results with their approach to motivation than all of the well-intentioned caring, relating, maneuvering, and adjusting of schools and teachers.

A PHILOSOPHY OF SUCCESS

Both schools and sports promote achievement, and they do many of the same things in going about it. But there is one basic difference in their approaches that is important to think about. It grows out of a basic distinction in how the two areas view themselves. Historically, teaching has seen itself primarily as a *helping profession*, along the same lines as other helping professions such as nursing, counseling and psychotherapy, and social work. In a helping profession, the emphasis is on giving, on being of service to the patient, client, or student. The focus of a helping profession is on personal needs, problems, or issues and their satisfaction or resolution. The stress is on the professional being there for people, attending to them, understanding them, empathizing with them,

relating to them, caring about them and taking care of them, being their advocate, setting things up for them and getting things out of their way, and supporting them in managing their circumstance. The central question of the helping profession is, How can I help you? If schools invite someone to speak to a faculty meeting about how to do their work better, they would be more likely to invite a prominent child psychologist than a successful basketball coach. The psychologist more closely aligns with how the school people look at it at what they do.

In sports, there is some of this helping profession frame of reference. You'll hear a lot of talk about coaches caring about their athletes and looking out for them. But stronger, I believe, is a *goal-attainment profession* self-perception among sports people. There is a success-and-failure, get-it-done mentality in sports. The central question in sports is not so much How can I help? as it is How can we get it done? Rather than being akin to an area like social work, sports is more like business or the militaty in the way it views its work. An indication of this is the frequency that business groups call on coaches—I am thinking of coaches Pat Riley and Rick Pitino—to speak at their gatherings and to provide them consultation. The businesspeople look upon these sports professionals as essentially being in the same line of work they are. They consider themselves and the sports world to share a common perspective. It is not as likely that General Electric would invite a teacher to tell them how to be more successful in its operations.

It is worth the time for educators to contemplate the implications of a helping professional orientation. A major one in the context of this writing is that it points them away from attending to what coaches think and do, and of course the point all through this is that schools would profit from what coaches could teach them. (For that matter, GE might do well to take in the wisdom of child psychologists.) One thing in particular schools could learn from many coaches is the way they impart a *philosophy of success* to their athletes: a set of ideas, values, and patterns of behavior that these coaches wholeheartedly believe leads to success on the field and in the other parts of life. These coaches teach—preach might be the word—this philosophy both directly and indirectly, from day one of the sports experience on, through what the coach says and does in the sports context and what he exemplifies in the rest of his life. Ideally, the coach is a living embodiment of this philosophy—sports values role models. He doesn't have to be a *perfect* living embodiment of it, but the philosophy should characterize his life.

When athletes accept and internalize this philosophy of success, it provides the context for everything that they do in the sports setting. It is a frame of

reference that allows them to receive and utilize instruction, collaborate effectively with their teammates and support them, and effectively propel themselves toward their maximum level of performance. If someone isn't oriented toward success, the richest of environments will matter for little or nothing—they won't make use of them. Many students bring other philosophies to the classroom that make success exceedingly difficult if not impossible. Some students have what could be called a philosophy of enduring or coping, others a philosophy of getting by, or doing OK, or good times, or hoping for the best, or watching, criticizing, and judging, or playing it safe and not getting hurt, or striking out or fighting back. Everything these students experience in the classroom, including the teacher's instruction, is filtered through this philosophy, to call it that, given mecning by it. Many teachers are teaching what would bring students success in the class, and in life generally, and they are teaching it well. The problem is that the students aren't oriented toward success and thus won't or can't take it in. Good coaches—or CEOs or military leaders—know that the way people hold the meaning of a particular circumstance makes all the difference in the world.

Gary Walton, a professor at the University of California at Davis studied legendary coaches of the past he calls "philosopher coaches." They included John Wooden, Percy Carutty, Brutus Hamilton, and Doc Counselman.[9] Each of these coaches came at it a bit differently, but all of them taught, and represented in their own lives, a set of principles for living a successful life, including in sports. They all valued success within the context of a decent life, a moral life. An exemplary life included the quest for excellence and accomplishment, but it was not to be equated with it. Achievement, status, and reward without goodness isn't worthy of respect, they held.

As I went through Walton's book I took note of what these philosopher coaches stressed with their athletes: self-control, intentness, focus on the goal, alertness, seeking to improve, initiative, and acting on opportunity; poise, confidence, and competitive greatness; ambition, adaptability, resourcefulness, and fight; hard work, willfulness, the pursuit of perfection; patience and persistence: self-reliance, spirit, and attitude. These coaches unabashedly taught character as well as sports skills: fulfilling commitments and living up to one's word; telling the truth; personal integrity (living consistently with one's highest values); playing fair; and not cheating even if you won't get caught.[10]

Former Baylor University football coach Grant Teaff has written a book entitled *Coaching in the Classroom.*[11] In it, he stresses what he calls the *principles of success.* They include finding a purpose; the habits of simplicity, planning, practice,

and enthusiasm; taking care of the little things; doing the best with what you have; overcoming criticism; being tenacious; being courageous; having great expectations; and turning a setback into a comeback. And here too is a strong moral dimension: Teaff calls it *Do the Right Thing.*[12] Some readers, among them educators, may look down on this kind of talk, thinking it too sappy and "uncoool" for them—they know better—but that perception may say more about them than it does the validity of what Teaff and the others are saying.

Writing this essay prompted me to re-read a couple of juvenile sports novels that I read as a child.[13] They were written by Clair Bee, a college basketball coach who wrote more than twenty in the Chip Hilton series. I bet I read just about all of them. The books follow Chip Hilton, a multi-sport star athlete from the fictional town of Valley Falls through his high school and college sports career. Reading them again, I would include Bee's name among the philosopher coaches. I saw that he was imparting a philosophy of success, which, here again, included a commitment to do one's best and being a decent human being. In those early years of my life, I was just reading them for the story. Or at least so I thought; perhaps without realizing it I was looking for some principles to live by. This time I saw clearly what Bee was saying about industriousness, enthusiasm, true cooperation, friendship, and loyalty. It hit me this time around how much Bee's writings about these things had gotten through to me then and live within me to this day as standards I use to direct and assess what I do in my life.

I'm sure that it is going to come off to more than a few as hokey and impractical, but I am thinking that educators should take it upon themselves to teach a philosophy of success to students. It appears to me to make sense in light of the limited results teachers get from all the beseeching, threatening, enticing, coaxing, relating, caring, and entertaining they do now. If you are a teacher or are going to be one, a good first step would be to identify the personal traits or strengths that you possess which have most accounted for the success you have attained in your own life. Also identify the moral principles you most cherish. Then ask yourself: Should I be teaching these traits and moral principles? And if the answer is *yes* to some or all of them, ask yourself, Am I willing to teach them? and, How can I begin?

GOALS AND STANDARDS

To many, the sports world has the ring of an uncomplicated place. It's just a game after all. It's simple: you hit the ball and run to first base. There's nothing

complex about that. If there's anything that has been brought home to me during the process of writing the sports book it is that sports can be a highly complicated, sophisticated operation. On the whole, coaches and athletes aren't as articulate as educators, but if you listen to them carefully and watch what they do, there is a lot there. One factor undoubtedly accounting for that is that sports is very much a bottom line business. In sports, you have to do more than talk a good game. You have to do more than care about the right things or say the right things or get people to like you or what you do. You have to put numbers on the board, as they say—perform, win—and you have to do it in the face of somebody competing against you who is trying to do the same thing at your expense. That situation breeds getting to what actually works, not just sounds good, and staying on your toes. You can't rest on your laurels in sports. Somebody will be gaining on you.

Consider how the sports world deals with goals athletes strive to achieve. It is actually very complicated, even at the school level. There are multiple goal structures that both coaches and athletes use to guide and assess their efforts. Before I get into this and what it might mean for education, however, some definitions: A *goal* is something you are trying to accomplish. Other words for it are purpose, aim, and objective. A *standard* provides a basis for rating a performance or the accomplishment of a goal. If the standard for competing in an Olympic one hundred meter race is 10.2 seconds and someone can run a 10.05, that tells us how to assess that performance. Goals and standards aren't mutually exclusive; many times a goal will include or imply a standard. For instance, a high school runner can have the goal of winning the state championship in the mile. That goal includes an implied standard, in this case the best times of the top runners who will compete against him. Goals and standards are very important in keeping people—in sports and elsewhere—on course and doing their best. It is not unusual for an athlete to concurrently be referenced in long range, short range, and immediate goals, and normative, absolute, and personal standards.

Talk to athletes and it strikes you how aware they tend to be of their individual goals. The athletes own these goals in a psychological sense. These are *their* goals; they feel a proprietary connection to them. The coach may also have goals for them, but in addition to that, the athletes have goals for themselves. They can tell you with remarkable specificity what they are trying to achieve by next year (long range), next month (short range), and right now (immediate). They can link up what they are doing this moment—say a bench press set during a weight training session—with their overall goals. The goals may be stated in terms of

continuous improvement relative to short and long-range goals, or the kinds or levels of effort (I'll do my weight training program four days a week; I'll give it 100% every practice). This is not the place to get into all the details of this, but it can, and often does, get complex; that is the point.

I think it is fair to say that the overage track athlete is clearer about and more invested in his goals than the average math student in school. The average math student is more along the lines of, "Well, I've got Carlson for algebra and it'd be nice to get a good grade in the class." The math student may be just disinterested and lazy, lets face it, but it may also be that the school context didn't really call upon him to be purposeful and self-conscious as a learner to the same extent that the sport culture does.

More on the three kinds of standards:

A *normative* standard is how well someone measures up to the performance of others. Athletes know precisely how they stack up compared to other athletes and teams. If a baseball player is hitting .326, he knows how well he is doing relative to other hitters. As for team comparisons, that is what he games are about, plus they post the league standings. And athletes don't just compare themselves with those they come in contact with; they rate themselves against the best even though far away and in the past. A baseball hitter has major league star Alex Rodriguez' swing, as well as films of former slugger Roger Maris', to compare his with. Do science students have anything approaching this level of understanding of how they are doing in a normative sense?

Then there are *absolute* standards. Basketball coach Bob Knight talks about playing against the game of basketball instead of the other team. He is referring to a kind of platonic ideal: the game of basketball as it ideally is played. What his and other players who refer to this standard are trying to do to see how closely they can approximate the perfect game of basketball. They don't expect to achieve that end, but it gives them a yardstick with which to measure their performance. Even as you compete against the other team, you can compete against the game of basketball itself. Using this standard, even the very best individuals and teams have something higher to shoot for—perfection. Would anybody ever talk about going to school in these terms?

And then there are *personal* standards. This gets at how well an athlete measures up against himself. How well is he doing compared to what he did before, or could do? In sport, there is the idea of *personal best.* A runner may have run a four-hour marathon—a slow time and far behind the winner, who may have run it in two-hours-and-twenty minutes—yet experience a great sense of

accomplishment and satisfaction. Why? Because it was his best time ever. His best time previous to this race was four-hours-and-fifteen minutes, and he beat that by fifteen minutes. He was a winner, really, and he has something to shoot for in the next race, a still better time, even as he knows he won't win the race.

If the concept of personal best were carried over to education, a student would be referenced in how well he was doing relative to his own previous standard of excellence. He would know precisely how well he has performed up to now and be able to measure his own improvement beyond his own personal frontier in this area of study. In addition to whatever other meaning he gives it, the class is a *self-surpassing* situation and opportunity; it was a chance to go past himself. Regardless of how well one is doing relative to other people, going beyond one's prior limit is a rewarding experience. Schools could be better at creating personal best or self-surpassing standards for students.

Another personal standard in sports has to do with what basketball players in particular call their "game." When basketball players talk about their game, they are referring to their unique individual style of playing basketball: the aspects of the sport they emphasize and their particular strengths as players. For them, competition on the court is a chance to express their game—show the world who they are as players and how far they have come—and at the same time work on their game (get better at it) and learn from other players' games. If students went to school that way, they would go to class to play their school game hard. They wouldn't just fall into a seat and see what comes up. They would use the class session as an opportunity to improve their game (become a more effective student). They would cooperate with the teacher (as a player would with a coach). They wouldn't get caught up with the fact that other students games are better than theirs right now, but they would observe the games of the best students to see what could be incorporated into their own games.

One of the ways sports promotes excellence among athletes is by being very good at taking note of accomplishments relative to goals and standards. Sports measures achievement in very fine gradations. In baseball, for example, the difference between a .310 and .311 batting average is noted. That is a difference of one hit per thousand at bats, or one extra hit every two years of a 162 game major league schedule. Hundred meter times in track are measured in thousandths of a second. In basketball, it makes a difference whether a player has a 22 or 22.1 points per game scoring average. This same point could be made using the examples of swimming, gymnastics, rowing, and many other

sports. Invariably, how well an athlete is doing is precisely noted, and if that improves or declines the least bit it will register. And those are individual measures; team performance is measured precisely as well. If a team wins even one more game this year than last, that will be acknowledged.

Sports tries to ensure that everything that matters is measured. If the measurement of one or two aspects of athletes' performance isn't enough to get at the quality of their play, sports will add indices to get an assessment of all the aspects that do count. For example, baseball isn't satisfied with measuring offensive performance on the basis of batting average alone. In addition to batting average, baseball calculates on-base percentage, slugging average, stolen bases, doubles, triples, home runs, and performance in clutch situations. Baseball wouldn't be content with only the equivalent of an SAT score and grade point average if that really didn't get them all of the pertinent information.

The fact that everything that matters will be acknowledged encourages athletes to attend to the minute details of all facets of their performance and to do their very best. In sports, the participants don't get away with even the least bit of slacking off, and they are rewarded for the smallest amount of increased effort or capability. While sports measures success and failure precisely, schools have a long history or moving in another direction. The profession has been very vocal about their opposition to objective, standardized tests. The claim is that they test the wrong things, don't measure anything important, and are biased against some youngsters. These kinds of tests run up against the egalitarian and anti-elitist values that are central in the profession. Unlike in sports, educators aren't comfortable with the idea of ranking people and that some people being better than others. There are forces outside the profession pushing them toward fine gradations of measurement against absolute and normative standards—politicians, the business community, some parents—but while some in the education field agree that it is needed, for the most part the profession has fought against going in that direction.

The central thrust in education has been to move away from paper and pencil tests to other, more personalized forms of assessment of student performance. One approach that has received a great deal of favorable play in the profession is the *exhibition of mastery* method.[15] Under this arrangement, students present the results of their work to a panel of teachers—and others perhaps, students, community representatives—to demonstrate their attainment of the goals of the school or the particular class. Another popular approach is *authentic assessment.*[15] Here, students document—say through a portfolio of their work—that they have learned what they were supposed to.

The arguments for these kinds of evaluations are articulate and heartfelt. The question, however, is how well they keep educational standards high and students pressing beyond their present capability and toward true excellence. With exhibitions of mastery, the feedback is usually yes-no, you-passed-or-didn't-pass, along with some comments from the reviewing panel. The people who respond to the students' exhibitions are likely to have been working with the students, or at least know them, and to feel an obligation to them and a concern that their feelings not be hurt. Sports has outside people doing the evaluation, referees and judges and so on, and they try to stay away from subjective assessments as much as possible. As a practical matter, with exhibitions just about everybody passes, just about everybody is satisfactory, because those assessing know how much hard work was involved in putting together the exhibitions and would feel bad about responding to all that hard work with a poor grade. Plus, the evaluators don't want to discourage the student or hold him back in school. Also, since the evaluators often times supported the students in preparing for the exhibitions, to give a failing grade to a student amounts to giving themselves a failing grade for not being more effective in helping that student. The effect of all these factors is that standards come down to meet the level of student performance on the exhibitions, whatever its objective merits.

With authentic assessments, portfolios or whatever form they take, typically students are slotted into one of a limited number of ranked categories. An authentic assessment system I am familiar with involves raters assigning a number from one to four to students' writing and math portfolios. So a particular student can only get a one, two, three, or four. Back to sports, I wonder about what effect this kind of arrangement would have had on Shaun Crawford, the track runner who won the 200 meter dash in the 2004 Olympics. He ran it in 19.72 seconds, beating the second place finisher's time of 20.1. Let's say the most Crawford could only have achieved was a one on a four-point scale for that time. The one would have put him in a category with all the other one's, that is, with all the other top runners in the world, but no finer measure would have been made to distinguish his performance from that of the other runners'—no 19.72 compared to 20.1. And no race of course, because the people in charge want to stay away from competition and comparing people—so no first-place finish, and no gold medal.

Under this system, would Crawford have put in all the time and effort to accomplish what he did? I don't think so, and that kind of arrangement is not going to promote serious effort and exemplary accomplishment in students either. And it is not just the "Shaun Crawfords"—superb students—who are going to

be affected. Back to the idea of personal best, without the acknowledgment of fine gradations of accomplishment, a student is not going to experience the reward that comes out of going past his prior standard of achievement, or the penalty that is the consequence of letting himself slip.

Fine-gradation measurements help people stay on top of how they are actually doing, stimulate them to do something about their situation, and inform them whether what they did (or didn't do) made any difference. In education, this argues for national, or at least state, standards and rigorous testing relative to them, something most educators are uncomfortable with. To the extent that educators truly want academic excellence, however, their opposition to this kind of approach seems to be working against it. I know their worry about the effects of rigorous testing on less capable and socially disadvantaged students, but if they employed a personal best concept that underscores improvement, as sports does, it would help to alleviate that concern. The truth of the matter is that everybody has to have a personal best standard in their self-assessment repertory. There are very few Shaun Crawfords in any area of life. For that matter, there are a lot of areas of Shaun Crawford's life where he isn't Shaun Crawford, if you know what I mean, and a personal best standard will serve him well there as well as in his running. We all have to learn to measure ourselves against our own current level of effort and accomplishment. Otherwise we are going to be frustrated and probably give up.

"110%"

Sports isn't nearly as hesitant as schools are to encourage an athlete to set very high goals and go after them with all they have in them. In sports they talk about giving it 110%. They point with pride to athletes who give everything of themselves to their sport, those who practice until it is too dark to see. Sports isn't afraid of intense commitment and engagement.[16] Schools, on the other hand, send mixed messages to students. They want hard work toward academic success, but they are also wary of what they perceive as excessiveness. Keep things in balance is the message that comes through to students. Don't go overboard. Don't lose perspective. Become well-rounded. Schools tend to see people who study day and night in a negative light, as drudges; something is a little wrong with those people. You wouldn't hear sports talk about a highly dedicated athletes that way. Sports doesn't assume that intensely focused and dedicated athletes are tormented souls. Educators, on the other hand, are fond of letting you know

that under-the-gun Japanese students commit suicide. (Which isn't true, by the way—the adolescent suicide rate today is higher in the United States than Japan, and this has been the case for almost twenty years.[17])

Schools need to look at their feelings about people who are willing to give school 110%, everything they have and more. Human beings, some of them anyway, find it satisfying to see what they are made of, to go beyond themselves. Schools need to look at the extent to which students who go that route in their studies are doing so in spite of the system rather than because of it.

NO CEILING TO ACHIEVEMENT

Characteristically, sports has been very good at creating situations where there isn't a ceiling to goal setting or attainment. Sports usually isn't a place where you can get just so much done and that's it, you aren't going above that. There isn't a lockstep in sports such as might prevail in a classroom where students do these math problems for tomorrow and get them right, and that's as much as they are expected to do and, for all practical purposes, can do. Sports also isn't a situation where the standard is whatever the middle-level performer can accomplish, or where the first priority is making sure that the lowest-level performers get by—which is the way it often is in education. Rather, in sports the sky's the limit. The only thing holding athletes back is their own talent and drive. Theoretically, they could play ball like Tracy McGrady (a top-flight NBA basketball player) or run a better two hundred meter time than Shaun Crawford.

In sports, all athletes, whatever their ability or attainment level, feel themselves confronting and pushing against their own personal frontier. The first team quarterback is pressing against his limits, and the third team quarterback is pressing against his. There isn't a single standard that applies to all players as there is in many classrooms ("All students will be able to . . ."), because sports knows that the only way to have the same standard apply to all students is to have a low standard. If all players on a basketball team had to be able to dunk the ball, you would have an eight-foot-high basket. Also, the first team quarterback doesn't feel he is obligated to go back and lift up the third teamer before he can move forward—unlike in much of classroom group work. Sports would rather the first teamer shot ahead as fast and as far as he can, and in the process establish a model for other athletes to emulate and a standard of performance for others to shoot for. A good measure of any class is whether students can go as far in the subject as their drive and ability allows.

POSITIVE RESULTS, NOT REASONS FOR FAILURE

Of course both sports and schools promote student achievement. The ultimate test of how well they have done in their efforts in this regard is not how hard they work at it, how much they care about it, or what they do and how good that sounds. The true test is the *results* they obtain with the athletes or students. What did these athletes or students get done? Sports is good at distinguishing means from ends. In sports, what matters is how much the athletes improve and how well they perform in the game, and everything a coach does—the means he employs—is assessed in terms of those ends. Educators tend to blur these distinctions. Often in education the focus is on means rather than ends and it stays there. What happened in the classroom? How did the discussion go? How involved were students? What do the students think of the teacher and the class? If the sports mentality carried over to the classroom, it would get right to: What came out of it? What did students learn? What are they now able to do that they couldn't before? How are their attitudes different? It might have been the most innovative assignment imaginable, but what exactly did students get from it? The teacher may care deeply about students, and students may love the class, but what got done in terms of students' growth and learning?

Not only does sports clearly separate out means from ends, it distinguishes positive results from *reasons* for not getting results. Someone can articulate the most compelling reasons for something not getting done, but still it didn't get done—and sports is clear about that. Often, it seems, educators settle for understanding why these children, from their background and all, haven't learned. If a coach tries that with his athletes, it isn't long before he is selling used cars.

I obtained a grant some years ago to interview successful sport professionals about how they approached their work. In one of the interviews, a college football coach whose athletes respected him and whose teams were remarkably successful observed that he has a policy of not getting too close to his athletes, that he stayed somewhat distant from them. That statement jumped out at me, coming as I do from a profession, education, that highly values close connections between teachers and students.

Why didn't he get close? He said that if he got close several bad things might happen. The first was that the relationship between him and the athletes might become the most important thing and detract from the establishment of another relationship that was the one he most wanted to effect—and that was a

relation between each of the athletes and the demands of the sport. He wanted his athletes to be engaged with the game, not him. He also worried that a close relationship with athletes would get them both giving their energies to matters that were extraneous to why they were there, and that was for these athletes to become as capable and productive individually as possible and for the team to become the best it can possibly be. He didn't want anything to sidetrack them from that purpose. Certainly if something in their lives, some crisis or problem, got in the way of athletes moving toward what is possible for them, the coach would attend to it. This often took the form of referring an athlete to professionals with special expertise: substance abuse programs, academic counseling, that sort of thing. But generally he stayed centered on what he was there for and what he could do well: help these young men learn how to play football. He wasn't a best friend, psychologist, or social worker. He was a football coach.

While this coach doesn't emphasize a close or personal relationship with his athletes, he does want to know them in a particular way, and that is *as athletes.* He wants to know exactly where they are at this point in their development as players: what they know and don't know and can and cannot do, and what they most need to work on to improve and contribute to the team. It isn't so important to him to know them personally, their backgrounds and interests and all. Not only can getting into that distract him from the task at hand, teaching them how to play football, but—and this is the biggest problem as he sees it—it can lead to lowering the level of what he expects from them. When you know about the details of someone's life, you are going to become aware of the limitations in this person and his situation, because everybody has them to one degree or another. Possessed of this knowledge, there is the natural tendency to lessen the demands you make to a level that seems more reasonable given what you know about this individual's personal and social circumstance, and to accept less from him than you would otherwise. If there is one thing that is true in life, what you get is very much related to what you expect and accept—and this coach wants to get the very best.

Some of this coach's athletes come from extremely difficult family situations and confront personal limitations, and his minority athletes have to deal with racism and discrimination in their lives. But nevertheless, they show up every day and produce at the highest level. A big part of the reason they do is that they feel they are expected to. They aren't hearing anything to the effect, "Oh, you've got it so tough, it would be understandable if you don't perform at the level of other players." Instead, it is simply, "Come here every day and soar!" And they do.

This posture raises questions that educators need to ask themselves. Does teaching the whole child, or relating to the whole child, as laudable and unimpeachable as that seems, actually impede students' success? Does it hold back the very students who most need good schooling—those from tough neighborhoods and shattered homes and minority children? Do teachers know each of their students as students well enough? Do educators try to take on functions that are beyond their professional expertise and that distract them from their job of teaching? The answer, in many cases, appears to be yes.

When the subject got around to athletes' potential, one successful coach we interviewed remarked, "Potential is what I lose with." When asked to explain, he said that performance is what wins games, not potential. An athlete or a team with talent that doesn't use it is no better than a player or team with no talent—neither of them gets anything done. Potential matters because it establishes a possibility, sets a ceiling, but unless the potential is realized it is of no value. This coach doesn't let himself forget that action and productivity is what counts, and he wants to make sure that his athletes don't either.

The coach said that he will let a player know that he sees potential in him, and tries to be reasonably specific about what that potential would look like if it were realized. He sees that as priming the pump, as it were. It lets the athlete know that there is a possibility out there, that something good could happen, and gives him a picture of what to shoot for. It also lets the athlete know the coach believes in him, has faith in him. The coach considers both of these things to be motivational for the athlete. However, during any talks about potential, the coach lets it be known what really matters is performance. He gets across that he is looking for is continuous, persistent effort and improvement from the athlete.

The coach said he quickly gets off the potential talk. He is concerned that if he makes too big a deal of potential and for too long a time, he might be unintentionally reinforcing potential, not performance, and that that is what he will get more of, potential. And potential, remember, is what he loses with; players who *could* do the job but *don't*. He wants to attend to and reward what he wants repeated—dedicated hard work in the right direction, and results.

This is something teachers could learn from. How often do teachers call a student up to their desk and say, "James, this is D paper, but you are so bright and could do so much better." The teacher's intent, of course, is to encourage James to do better next time, live up to his potential.

The next paper comes in and it's another D. The teacher sees the D and assumes his message didn't get through to James the last time. So he says, more emphatically this time around, "James, listen to me! You have outstanding ability. I know it's there. Use it. I know you can. Now do it!"

Next assignment, the student doesn't turn it in at all. The teacher thinks, "I must not be getting through to this kid."

The chances are this teacher is getting through very well indeed, just not in the way he had hoped. What has been going on is that this student has been getting paid off right along. He has been hearing that he matches up well with prime values in the school: having ability and potential. Schools make a big to-do about ability and the future and about what might happen then, and within that frame the student is doing just fine. In fact, if he does try to actually get something done he runs the risk of producing C work and losing his identity as someone with potential. He is better off doing what he is doing: producing nothing but at the same time sending out signals that he could do better if he wanted to and getting all the attention and praise that goes along with that. And whether the student fully realizes it or it or not, that is precisely what he is doing. And whether the teacher realizes it or not, he is contributing to it.

The lesson in all this for educators is to know exactly what they want (potential or outcomes in this case) and pay that off not and not something else. If you want hard work and improvement, attend to that. Let students know you want it, try to rig circumstances that up the chances of it occurring, and when you see any indication of it, respond fast and favorably. There is much at stake. Not only might it improve students academic performance, it might also prevent teachers from unintentionally contributing to the already burgeoning numbers of adults who's major claim to fame is their untapped potential. That's something we all lose with.

As anyone who has taught in schools, including universities, as I have will attest, schools are inundated with excuses. There are the dentist and doctor appointments, family obligations, sick relatives, dying grandmothers, friends in trouble, relationship crises, bouts with the blues, gnawing colds and flu, not getting back from the trip on time, malfunctioning alarm clocks, transportation troubles, assignments in other classes cutting into the work for this one, and computer foul-ups that ate the assignment or messed up the margins. "I was up real late last night." "We had [will have] a play rehearsal." "I have to leave early." "I'll be there late." "I won't be there." "Could I hand it in next Tuesday—or Thursday?" "It would have been better except I had to . . . ." "I have to work on

Wednesday nights." "I've got a learning disability." The idea is that since whatever-it-was got in the way, the student should be excused from the class, or get credit for the assignment (with a good grade) or be able to do it later. Everything's OK if there is a good reason why it didn't get done or was done poorly.

And it isn't only the students who contribute to the avalanche of reasons for students' lack of results. There are the notes from doctors, parents, and counselors about why Meaghan or Steven wasn't there, won't be there, or can't do it. Educators pitch in very nicely themselves, both to excuse students' lack of success and their own. Thomas would do better if he didn't have that tough situation at home, weren't poor, and wasn't the victim of a racist society. Sarah would succeed if she weren't ignored in favor of the boys and discouraged in math and science. Jason and the science teacher don't get along. Mrs. Franklin is messing up that English class, and that is why Jennifer isn't learning anything. And then there are all the reasons why they aren't getting results as teachers. "You can't get anything done last period. The kids are tired and waiting to go home." "This [whatever it is] should have started in the earlier grades. By the time they get to me, it's too late to do anything." "I'm getting no support at home with these kids." "We've got a nothing principal. Without good leadership, you're dead." It's just before vacation, just after vacation, it's too hot in here, too cold, the paperback didn't get ordered, the text is no good, the students are itchy seventh graders or have "senioritis."

The sports world has its excuses too. Both coaches and athletes come up with reasons why it didn't happen this game or this year. But there is less of this kind of thing, and it is a less acceptable practice in the sports culture. Sports is more given to zeroing in on an athlete's performance and assessing and rewarding him on that basis alone. At the end of the season, the player who has hit the most home runs is the home run champion—period. Some other player may actually be a better home run hitter, but he had a wrist injury that kept him out of some games and he didn't hit as many home runs. Well, that's just the breaks of the game. You don't hear endless whining from the player about his wrist, and he isn't granted a pass and given the home run championship because he has a valid excuse. Very early, athletes learn that excuses don't count for much in the sports world. Nobody wants to hear about why you can't make it to practice or your tough situation at home or in the society. The sports world realizes that if you allow for excuses, especially *good* ones, it is human nature for people to take advantage of them. They wind up defining themselves by their problems rather than struggling to get beyond them, expecting less of themselves, depending on others to cater to them or bail them out, accomplishing less than

they could, and thinking less of themselves than if they had taken Nike's advice to "just do it!"

The worry, of course, is that schools are helping to produce people whose most advanced skill is convincing themselves and others why it is all bigger than they are and they can't get it done. Schools should let students know that life is about trying to hit homes runs (and singles too, it all adds up) and actually hitting them. The game has started, and after the ninth inning it is over and your results are added up. So step up to the plate and take your best swings at the ball.